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Year: 2017

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## Unruly markets, the global factory, and uneven development

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Abstract: A review of Assembling Export Markets: The Making and Unmaking of Global Food Connections in West Africa by Stefan Ouma, Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015. Global Displacements: The Making of Uneven Development in the Caribbean by Marion Werner, Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2016.1226125>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-125975>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Berndt, Christian (2017). Unruly markets, the global factory, and uneven development. *Economic Geography*, 93(2):202-208.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00130095.2016.1226125>

## Unruly markets, the global factory and uneven development

A review of

*Assembling Export Markets: The Making and Unmaking of Global Food Connection in West Africa* By Stefan Ouma Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

*Global Displacements: The Making of Uneven Development in the Caribbean* By Marion Werner Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016.

At a time when empirical work is increasingly done as “fast research” or sidelined altogether, it is a pleasure to see what good monographs are capable of achieving. Marion Werner’s *Global Displacements* and Stefan Ouma’s *Assembling Export Markets* engage with the utopia and ideology (depending on your point of view) of Development and the realization of these ideas in specific geographical contexts. Focusing on development through export-oriented integration into global markets, both books are grounded in a wealth of ethnographic material, gathered with an amount of fieldwork that few scholars are prepared or are able to invest in the current academic environment. In both cases the reader is presented with a theoretically-driven account of the twisted trajectories of export-oriented development. Ouma’s focus is on Ghana and on attempts to promote high value agriculture as a means for export-oriented development. *Assembling Export Markets* provides an empirically rich account of the complexities of two particular market-making projects in different parts of the country: fresh pineapple production in Southern Ghana’s Densu Valley and the cultivation of organic mangoes in the North of the country. The main strength of the book is its preoccupation with the “how” of marketization: “How did the company create and extend the connections sustaining its markets? (...) How were these connections maintained across space and time amid competitive and regulatory dynamics, and what impact did this have on local farmers and the wider regional economy” (Ouma 2015, 5)? This impressive study of attempts to “make agricultural markets” in Ghana is cutting edge scholarly work of the highest quality that I greatly enjoyed reading.

Werner's focus is on the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In her case economic and social development is to be achieved first and foremost through the insertion of people and places into global garment production. Taking issue with the familiar stageist narrative of linear improvement and progress *Global Displacements* deconstructs the "global factory" as an unstable arrangement of power and difference. Three implications stand out: First there is the insight that the restructuring of global production works fundamentally through labor relations. This includes the rearticulation of the labor process both within and across firms, the devaluation of labor as "unemployed" and "disposable", and the reminder that collective organization of workers continues to be the most promising way for labor to resist these processes. Second, there is the interrelated observation that all this takes place in uneven regulatory contexts deeply structured through categories of social difference. And finally, Werner brilliantly demonstrates how "the global factory" works as a set of discourses and spatial imaginaries in addition to the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation.

### **Political economy and cultural economy in dialogue**

A key strength is the careful theoretical approach informing both books. It is a great relief that the days of an unproductive stalemate between relatively more "political economic" and relatively more "poststructuralist" approaches finally appear to be a thing of the past. Written in the spirit of what Trevor Barnes and Eric Sheppard have called "engaged pluralism" (Barnes and Sheppard 2010, 193), *Global Displacements* and *Assembling Export Markets* are great examples for what can be achieved when both perspectives are put into dialogue with each other. To be sure, in both cases this is achieved from carefully circumscribed positions. Werner's starting point is feminist and postcolonial political economy, productively engaging with cultural studies and poststructuralist conceptualizations of subject and identity. Testimony of her commitment to critical (economic) geography she consistently reads these approaches against the question of uneven development, an attitude that enables her to hold these diverse approaches together. Ouma's "home ground" is Science and Technology Studies inspired "social studies of economization". In the spirit of this approach his focus is on marketization both as being informed by certain types of economic

knowledge and as being socio-technically distributed. In a truly impressive way his book gives us rare insights into the distanced markets that have become so typical in global capitalism: taking chain-like form under the disciplinary regime of supply chain management, standards and state regulation. However, *Assembling Export Markets* is also a great example that such an analysis can only be performed meaningfully in dialogue with other theoretical perspectives. Ouma does so in a careful, thoughtful way, choosing with political economy, the French convention school or Foucauldian thought approaches that are complementary to and capable of deepening his analysis.

In their particular ways the books use the strengths of these conceptual underpinnings to address some of the shortcomings that continue to beset the literature around global value chains and global production networks. In the case of *Global Displacements* this concerns the role of labor. According to Werner, the one-sided focus in much of the literature on inter-firm relations and on value chain integration has started to be corrected in the more recent debate. However, these scholarly contributions do so either by portraying labor as passive objects in global production systems or as active agents that are capable of shaping these arrangement through collective struggles. Her solution is an approach that does not limit itself to the particular role in a given production network. She shows the merits of a historical perspective that approaches the question of labor through the lens of colonial legacies and how these intersect with the global production arrangements in question. This nicely enables her to give labor an active role in the production of place without naïvely celebrating labor's agency (Werner 2016, 11-12).

Ouma addresses a different weakness of the variegated literatures dealing with global production arrangements – the relative silence on how precisely integration into global markets is achieved practically. Literally “grounding” commodity/value chains in everyday practices of marketization he is able to show how his pineapple and mango market arrangements are the result of the collaborative work of farmers, mobile phones, market prices, valorimeters, specialized accounting software, interest-free loans, and so on. It is still only a relatively recent phenomenon that economic geographers and scholars from neighboring disciplines have rediscovered “the market” as an object

of theoretical reflection and empirical study more generally. A growing number of exciting, theoretically sophisticated empirical studies of real-world markets have emerged that do not take markets simply as granted but are attempting to understand how real markets are produced, stabilized, and dissolved. The focus of such work is not on markets as stable economic entities, but on the process of market-making or marketization. *Assembling Export Markets* and Ouma's work more generally is at the forefront of attempts to apply this perspective to the global south (see also Ouma, Boeckler and Lindner 2013).

### **Uneven development, marketization and the global factory**

A second noteworthy quality of both books is the way they connect with the question of development, focusing predominantly on what Gillian Hart has termed "little d" development, that is, "the development of capitalism as socially and spatially uneven, profoundly contradictory processes of creation and destruction" (Hart 2001, 650). In *Global Displacements* it is most and foremost the idea of export-oriented industrialization that shapes the processes at both sides of the Haitian-Dominican border. It is the mythical "global factory", and the entanglement with global production networks and supply chains that captures the minds of the people involved. What we see immediately is the notorious "moodiness" of global production networks, at one moment in time having Santiago and the Cibao on the Dominican side of border firmly in their grip and producing a landscape of factories, transport infrastructure and housing, only to change their mind and move across the border to Ouanaminthe on the Haitian side where integration into global markets occurs at the cost of domestic agriculture. But these are not – and this is a crucial element of Werner's argument – simple moods and whims without a deeper logic. The rationale providing meaning to these developments is provided by the combined work of history and geography, that is the familiar trope of modernization and progress and the corresponding projection of these ideas onto space. On the Dominican side this started with negative representations both by domestic elites and international players such as the World Bank of an overtly bureaucratic and protected domestic economy run under the much loathed ISI-regime (import substitution industrialization). ISI constituted the mirror

against which a dynamic, globally competitive sector assumed its form alongside gendered construction of labor as value and non-value. But this epoch suddenly ended by turning the argument on its head. What was formerly celebrated as an incarnation of progress suddenly turned into an inefficient obstacle to development. This narrative prepared the ground for the relocation of production facilities across the border to Haiti, disguised in the production sharing discourse so familiar from other binational border contexts (i.e. Mexican-US Border). And the dualist discourse wasted no time to resume its stabilizing work: A new spatial fix has been produced, a new trade zone emerging on what has been represented as some kind of *terra nullius*, a greenfield site in a region apparently beset with 90 percent unemployment (Werner 2016, 114). By pointing to contrasting imaginations of the area on the part of local residents who represented their town in a nostalgic way as a closely-knit community unaffected by perceived downsides of modernization, Werner shows, first, that there are always rival imaginaries that are erased by the dominant global factory discourse and, second, that the former are not necessarily more real than the latter but play an important role in crystallizing alternatives and resistance. The example of a local opposition initiative in Ouana-minthe is a case in point, activists celebrating a fertile agricultural region by displaying regional products in the capital city Port-au-Prince with the aim of countering representations that portray the area as barren and of little economic value (Werner 2016, 123). What emerges clearly, however, is how these representations create only an appearance of order. Behind the modernizing veil lurks an awful lot of experimentation and contingencies, uncertainties variably connected to changes in global trade regimes, the strategies of lead firms in the garment value chain or relations with key players in the US.

The final observation connects well with Ouma's analysis. In Ghana development through integration into agricultural commodity chains occurs at least partly at the expense of domestic alternatives. His regional focus is well-chosen. While other African countries are still far ahead of Ghana in terms of fruit and vegetable production and exports, the country has captured the imagination of external observers in the media, in the development industry, and policy circles of the global north,

being represented as an “African emerging economy” (Ouma 2015, 54). The silver bullet for Ghana appears to be value chain development, that is, the translation of the value chain concepts into a development tool that is capable of making farms and businesses more efficient and of promoting economic growth that is “pro-poor”. The farmers are apparently no longer imagined as primary producers and cheap labor force, but rather as entrepreneurs who employ the latest technologies, working in experimental spaces in which a heterogeneous set of actors (human and non-human) collaborate in “reworking or advancing the frontier regions of agrarian marketization” (Ouma 2015, 59).

It is Ouma’s careful discussion of attempts to integrate Ghanaian regions with high value agricultural value chains and markets, whether in the form of the pineapple or the mango that nicely show the extent to which the boundaries between “big D” and “little d” development continue to be blurred in today’s post-Washington Consensus times. The case-studies on new agrarian frontiers in Ghana are timely as they stand for a recent rethinking in parts of the development industry: A heterogeneous development community is actively implicated in the extension of capitalist market relations and/or the reconfiguration of the ways in which people and places in the global south are articulated with global commodity circuits. Being part of a broader “consensus on poverty alleviation” that aims to incentivize risk-taking and entrepreneurial behavior (Peck 2011, 165), a confusing array of templates, frameworks and programs emerged, all designed to enable the world’s rural poor to better profit from market integration. Prominent examples in this context are the ‘Making Markets Work for the Poor Approach (M4P)’, which originated as a joint initiative between the UK (DFID) and Swiss (SDA) development agencies in the early 2000s, and programs that mobilize the value chain for pro-poor market development (see Berndt 2015; Werner et al. 2014).

This is not to say that Development is absent in the Dominican Republic/Haiti case. There are repeated instances when World Bank and development agencies raise their voices, influencing the particular trajectory of the regions studied. This ranges from the Bank’s role in pushing for export-oriented industrialization in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean during the 1990s and the

subsequent representation of the DR as a dual economy (trade zone/non-trade zone), to the apparently sudden change of opinion in representing the garment sector as an obstacle to development in the 2000s, and the way the Haitian economy was directed towards export-oriented garment production instead of domestic agriculture in the years following the 2010 earthquake.

### **Crisis geographies: Unruly markets and politics of dis/investment**

Both books deepen our understanding of the way in which insertion in global markets reworks the geographies of uneven development in the global South. *Global Displacements* speaks directly to the way development proceeds in deeply unequal ways, both socially and geographically. This is also the thrust of Marion Werner's recent conceptual elaboration, jointly with Jennifer Bair, of an "disarticulation perspective" that counters the inclusive bias of much value chain research by "connecting an analysis of global commodities to the politics of disinvestment, devaluation, place-making, and subject-making which make their production possible" (Bair and Werner 2011, 990). The binational "to and fro" at the heart of the book's discussion is a perfect way to illustrate this. Toward the end we find a quotation that nicely summarizes this with a view to the establishment of a garment export processing zone in Haiti:

The trade zone was far from a naturalized expansion of wage labor to a new frontier. Rather, garment capital, supported by its transnational counterpart and international development donors, seized upon the border - an intensifying contour of sociospatial unevenness - as a source of potential for the extraction of surplus value (Werner 2016, 134).

Although uneven development is touched upon more indirectly in *Assembling Export Markets*, the skillful reconstruction of both marketization case studies is welcome proof that an often voiced critique against social studies of economization/marketization is misleading. I refer to the perceived absence of questions of politics and power in these literatures. Against this, Ouma shows very clearly that work in this tradition is capable of being sensitive to power asymmetries. His "critical ethnographies of marketization" consider the contingent ordering of reality a thoroughly political ques-



tion, framing it with the concept of performance. Ouma shows that markets always emerge as a result of a double play of connecting and disconnecting, of entangling and disentangling. In this context, it is the misfires and overflowings inevitably produced by framing that open up space for political debate and controversy. They give rise to “performance struggles” about the demarcation of the “economic” and the “non-economic” that reconfigure and redefine what markets and politics are about. By critically drawing on concepts like performance Ouma is also able to show how social reality can be “recalcitrant”. How market-making is resisted and how carefully assembled market arrangements fall apart.

Both books approach uneven geographies of market-making and market integration through the lens of emergencies and crises and use those exceptional moments, when everything appears to be suddenly up for grabs, to reconstruct processes of disarticulation and performance. In the case of Haiti crises take manifold form, reaching from socionatural disasters such as earthquakes and various debt crises to the commodity price boom in 2007-2008. In a careful reconstruction of the debates and narratives around those “crises” Werner draws on the work of Janet Roitman (2014) and shows how vested interests are able to use those emergencies as events that stabilize the historical sequencing of development into stages, for instance by discrediting fledgling attempts to push for domestic agriculture as a means for development and demanding a renewed focus on export-oriented garment production in trade zones. While one may certainly be skeptical as to the sustainability of a development model that is based on domestic agriculture in a context such as post-earthquake Haiti, Werner is right when concluding that the stubborn resilience of the global factory as a symbol for development in stages is not very encouraging.

In Ghana, Ouma was confronted with crises that had slightly different repercussions. He paints the picture of a crisis-ridden, unstable incorporation into global markets. The caprices of traders, retailers and end consumers are a perfect example that marketization processes are notoriously unstable and prone to failure. His emphasis is on the impossibility to stabilize, to reorder that which has fallen out of the market frame. He does so being sensitive to the insight that connections are always

made and unmade in marketization processes, that there are always dis/entanglements or – to use Werner and Bair’s term – dis/articulations. With a certain bias towards the chaotic and incomplete, Ouma is more optimistic regarding the possibility of various forms of resistance. It is possible therefore to read both books and the theoretical perspectives that inform them as complementary. In their particular ways, both books are regional geographies of the highest quality, always sensitive to the particular histories of the places in question. At the same time the reader is reminded that these geographies are relational. We cannot understand the twisted histories and geographies of garment production at Hispaniola without taking into account the global restructuring of garment commodity chains, changing global trade regimes, the policy fads emerging from development institutions in Washington and the particular ways in which US government and capital have adversely incorporated regions and people in Mexico, Central America or the Caribbean, regularly playing those places off against each other. And much the same holds for Ouma’s sites of high value agricultural production. The expanding market frontier creates “boundary regions” where different actors struggle over the best position in global commodity chains. They do so in a context of corporate restructuring, supply chain management and changing consumer preferences, selectively dis/entangling people and places from/with global markets and value chains.

All in all, the reader is left with two extraordinary books that one cannot do justice with in the space provided for this review. Both *Global Displacements* and *Assembling Export Markets* offer provocative insights enabling the reader to look behind the veils of all-too-simplistic representations that promise economic development with the help of “global factory” and “global value chain” and often have little time to accept that they create difficult situations for those subject to these interventions: Whether we look at the pineapple plantation worker and the mango outgrower in Ghana or the Hispaniola garment worker - once pulled into the orbit of Western globalization it seems there remains only an impossible choice: One can neither live with development nor without, whether it is of the “little d” or “big D” type. Or as Arturo Escobar (2012: xix) commented recently: “Not only

does the development project go on, it seems to have become stronger since the mid-1990s". This is a sobering conclusion for all of us who look for alternatives.

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